

## Chapter 4

# THE CHALLENGE OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN KOREA

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In spite of the fact that Korea is considered a First World country (especially compared to African countries), the practice of ancestor worship is still prevalent and has proven to be a matter of ongoing interest for anthropologists and theologians alike. Ancestor worship in Korea is generally defined in terms of Confucian or Neo-Confucian tradition (Ro 1988; Adams 1995).

Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to gain an understanding of:

- The nature of the religious background in Korea.
- How ancestral rites are practised in general.
- How Christianity has dealt with ancestor worship in the Korean context.

### 4.2 THE PRESENT SITUATION IN KOREAN CHRISTIANITY

Protestant Christianity has grown to become the dominant religion in Korea after Buddhism. Since its introduction 1884, the membership of the Korean Protestant churches has grown to a staggering number of close to ten million members which in effect constitutes 20% of the entire population of South Korea. At present, Korea has 60 000 Protestant churches, 100 000 ministers and 12 000 overseas missionaries, second only to the USA. As Kim (2004:132) rightfully points out, Korea has also earned a reputation as a missionary country.

Christianity in Korea is a remarkable success story, especially when one considers that Protestant Christians constitute a mere 2% of the Asian population. Christianity in Korea has yielded a growth unparalleled in church history. This is even more so, when one considers that Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, has failed to perform equally well in Japan, a neighbouring country with a similar social structure and shared cultural traditions, where less than 1% population has converted to Christianity (Kim 2000:117).

#### 4.2.1 Principles of growth in Korean Christianity

The explosive growth of Christianity in Korea happened mainly during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Christianity was already firmly established during the fifties of the previous century. The early history of the Korean church tells of much suffering and sacrifice (e.g. Pack 1973, Park 1975). Therefore it is rather ironic that the re-

cent growth of Christianity in Korea can be partly ascribed to the fact that the Korean Church provided the basic tools of modernisation and assumed a central role in the economic, political, and social modernisation of South Korea. Thus, many Koreans regarded the acceptance of the Gospel as a means of entry into modern society and access to what they believed to be a more advanced civilisation (Park 1975; JY. Kim 1984). The “Christianity-modernisation nexus” has been solidified and enhanced further by the number of Christians who have held prominent leadership positions within the country's political, social, academic and financial sectors. This is supported by Kim (2000:115) who notes that “from the leaders of the independence movement to the current political leadership, Christians have always been conspicuously salient in the nation's politics.”

This begs the question as to why Korean Christianity took off in this way but not in neighbouring Japan, which is also a highly modernised country. Why did neighbouring countries such as China and Japan not embrace Christianity and achieve the same growth and revival as Korea did? Are there other underlying factors which have impeded the establishment of Christianity in these countries? Are there other reasons besides the apparent need for modernisation which have influenced the establishment of Christianity in these countries? Kim (2004:132) ascribes the success of Christianity in Korea to the dynamics of Korean Christianity. Kim (2004) argues that this is because it has adapted to traditional religions and culture (without being mixed with traditional culture), and has been transformed through moderation and adaptation while retaining certain essential differences.

One factor which exemplifies this transformation is the issue of ancestor worship. Elements of ancestor worship in Korea have been successfully transformed in Korean Christianity without constituting a conflict in theological principles. We will therefore explore the nature of ancestor worship in modern Korea in order to gain a clearer understanding of how this has impacted on the establishment of Korean Christianity.

#### **4.2.2 Ancestor worship in Modern Korea**

The advent of modernisation in Korea brought with it the expectation that there would be a decline in the prevalence of ancestral sacrifice especially since the traditional view of spirits and life peculiar to ancestor worship are foreign to most modern countries. Son (1988:61-71), in his essay, “Ancestor Worship: From the Perspective of Modernisation”, lists five factors which indicate that ancestor worship in Korea will not be revived strongly, namely the weakened status of Confucianism, secularisation of the traditional worldview, disintegration of traditional family and social structures, sense of estrangement toward the rites and Christian influence on society.

Nevertheless, ancestor worship is still practised by many Korean people. This is evident from the large number of families that make regular visits to their ancestral graves and perform many rites associated with their ancestors. Koreans who still practice ancestor worship generally observe these rites every January 1 (*Sul*) and August 15 (*Chusuk*, of the lunar calendar) when ancestral homes and tombs are visited and on *Hansik* Day in March, when sacrificial food is offered at the ancestral tomb (Ryoo 1985:

52). The large numbers of people involved mean that many Korean people visit their ancestral grave sites to offer ancestral services for their ancestors, which is clear evidence that ancestor worship is still alive and well in South Korea.

How has Korean Christianity coped with ancestor worship? The Korean Protestant Church resisted being syncretised with shamanistic ancestor worship. As a result many Christians were martyred. In an attempt to accommodate the social and traditional elements required by Korean culture, the Korean Christian Church instituted the memorial service as an alternative. This meant that the Korean Protestant Church was able to meet the moral and social functions previously fulfilled by ancestor worship while eliminating the religious elements of ancestor worship without compromising the principles of the Gospel. In other words, ancestor worship in the Korean Church was transformed into the Koreanised memorial service which served the indigenous culture. However, Kim (2004:150) points out that it still has the shamanistic ritual elements reminiscent of ancestor worship:

In today's Christian memorial ritual, elements of Confucian worship have been intermingled. Not a few Korean Christians have been conducting memorial services mixed with Confucian ritual. They look, for example, to the picture of the deceased, make a bow, burn candles and put them in front of the grave (Ryoo 1987:200). The cause of this is the fact that the Confucian ritual has not yet been transformed into a Christian one. Korean Christianity needs, on the one hand, to revive the filial spirit towards the ancestors, on the other hand, to criticise the filial spirit that has the ritual form of Shamanistic adoration of souls and spirits, and to baptise it in the Christian form.

Of course, the filial piety in current memorial services has influenced many people, Christian as well as non-Christian. It is however crucial for the Korean Protestant Church to filter out the basic shamanistic ritual elements in order to transform the Confucian ancestor worship into an essentially Christian ritual.

In order to fully grasp the scope and implications of this phenomenon one needs to explore and distinguish the moral and social functions of ancestor worship from the religious elements implicit in ancestor worship and how other religions have influenced ancestor worship. It is impossible to understand the Koreanised ancestor worship without grasping the religious background where Korean ancestor worship has its roots.

### **4.3 RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP**

Before exploring the religious background and influence of other religions on ancestor worship in Korea, we need to focus on the origins of ancestor worship in Korea.

#### **4.3.1 The origin of Korean ancestor worship**

Ancestor worship is inherent to most civilisations and is a universal phenomenon which is not peculiar to Korea. Ryoo (1985:53) points out that the custom of ancestor worship has been at the core of religion since early times. People generally think that an ancestor's spirit is a protector against a variety of enemies. The notion that the ancestor's spirit is able to distinguish good from bad has been prevalent among generations of worshippers. Ryoo dates the formalised rituals of ancestor worship to the reign of King of Silla (during the time of the Three Kingdoms).

Ro (1988:10) also traces the origin of formalised ancestor worship in Korea to the period of the Three Kingdoms where it was limited to the royal families and took on various forms. For example the kingdom of *Pack-che* had a form of ancestor worship for venerating the founding father, known as *On-cho*. *Silla* and *Koguryo* had a similar form for venerating their founding fathers. These worship rituals were conducted four times a year following the change of seasons.

It was not until the end of the *Koryo* dynasty and the beginning of the *Yi* dynasty (15th century) that a definitive form of ancestor worship became established. At this time Korean Neo-Confucian scholars such as *Paek Yi-chung* and *Chong Mong-Ju* introduced the *Han* and *T'ang* systems of ancestor worship.

Confucianism had a tremendous influence on the religious practices in the Three Kingdoms although Buddhism was already the dominant religion. The establishment of Confucianism as the dominant ideology for the *Yi* dynasty led to the popularisation of ancestor worship among Korean families. This included the establishment of a family lineage shrine in each household. Although Buddhism was the official of the *Koryo* dynasty ancestor worship, including the three-year mourning ritual, was continued to be practised.

#### **4.3.2 Influence of other religions on the development and establishment of Korean ancestor worship**

To what extent have other religions accelerated or influenced contemporary Confucian ancestor worship? South Korea is one of the most religiously cosmopolitan countries in the world. Korea has no “official” or dominant religion. Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and numerous new religious movements all manage to co-exist peacefully in this complex society (Kim 2000:112). It stands to reason the presence of so many religions over such a long period of time in Korea must have had an influence in the development of ancestor worship in Korea. Certain religious beliefs in Korean Traditional Religion must also have permeated into the core of Korean ancestor worship.

We will therefore explore the influence of beliefs such as the Animistic and Shamanistic concepts of the supernatural world, the Buddhist concepts of reincarnation and Nirvana, and the Confucian ethical and social ideal (especially filial piety). These concepts were assimilated into Confucian ancestor worship which became the cornerstone of modern Korean ancestor worship. Aside from these major religions, one also needs to consider which religious elements from traditional religions in the country have influenced ancestor worship in Korea.

##### **4.3.2.1 Animism**

Animism is the oldest religion of Korea and as such was the only religion up to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD Confucianism and Buddhism entered Korean civilisation from China much later.

Chae (2002:46) defines animism as a primitive religion in which nature and spirits are the main objects of worship. At the core of animistic dogma is the belief that spirits inhabit everything. In this regard Nida (1954:136) describes it in the following terms:

By “animistic” we mean believing in spirits, not only in the spirits of dead persons, but also in spirits which dwell in natural objects, such as trees, streams, mountains, a gnarled root, a perforated stone, or a meteorite. Such objects are sometimes called fetishes and regarded as immortal. It is often possible when speaking of the religious aspects of many primitive cultures to assign Animism a dominant role, but Animism is rarely, if ever, the exclusive religious feature. Animistic beliefs are usually travelling companions with many other religious concepts and practices.

Scholars such as Brandon (1970:82) and Chae (2002:48) highlight the belief in the existence of the soul as one of the defining characteristics of Animism and by implication a pivotal notion fundamental to ancestor worship (Brandon, 1970). Therefore, animists believe that ghosts and spirits dwell in natural objects, animals and corpses of human beings. The connection between this ideological concept and the practise of ancestor worship is fairly simple. In this religion, ancestors are considered to be living members of the family, who take care of their descendants by providing protection and blessings. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Ancestors are also believed to curse their descendants if they neglect to offer sacrifices on their memorial day.

This long-standing belief in the immortality of the soul in Korea has solidified the practice of ancestor worship over time. As a result, Korean people have been worshipping the spirits of dead for generations in an attempt to maintain a harmonious relationship with their ancestors.

Bang (2002:9) describes the cult of deceased spirits as an attempt to maintain a harmonious relationship with the spiritual deceased, as a practice of reverence. Such a form of reverence is considered as the highest venerable expression of human beings and is fundamental to Korean ethic. At any rate, this constant struggle to maintain a proper relationship with the spiritual deceased ancestors has formalised and systemised ancestral sacrifices in Korean traditional religions.

#### **4.3.2.2 Shamanism**

Ro (1988:11) regards Shamanism as the most influential religious tradition in Korea. This notion is supported by scholars such as Kim (2000:118) (1999:28) and Moon (1982:17) who describe Shamanism as the most fundamental and influential religious custom of the Korean people. They also link Shamanism to the enduring core of Korean and religious thought which in turn has had a profound influence on the development of Korean attitudes, behaviours and cultural practices. The influence of Shamanism is so significant that newly introduced religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Christianity had to compromise with and absorb elements of Shamanism in order to be accepted by the Korean populace.

The term “shaman” was taken directly from the *Tungus* language of Siberia (Cox 1995:225; Kim 1999:24). Although the full spectrum of Shamanism is too diverse to explore here, it can be said to refer to a religious reality that is so basic and universal that similar beliefs, customs and practices can be found almost everywhere, especially

in primal societies (e.g. Asia, Australia, Native Americans and Eskimos on the North American continent, and natives of the African continent and Southern Pacific areas). In other words, we would be hard pressed to find a part of the world that did not have some form of Shamanism (Kim 1999:27).

Shamanistic spirituality attempts to find resolution for the conflicts caused by physical and social disorders or cosmic disharmony. These conflicts are often manifested in the form of disease, a loss of life, immature death, calamities by unknown reasons, etc. These conflicts can be resolved by a shaman who is supposed to possess the power of relating the world of man to the world of the “spirit” and “gods,” the living to the dead. In doing so, a shaman is able to go beyond the boundaries of the duality and to strike a harmonious relationship between the conflicting two worlds. Thus, a shaman is able to communicate with the dead, the sick, appease the malice of evil spirits, and invoke the protection of the benevolent ones (Yu 1978:151-152).

Chae (2002:52) highlights the significant role of the belief in a multiplicity of spirits and in the continued existence or immortality of the soul after death. In that sense, Shamanism is also inseparable from ancestor worship. This traditional and spontaneous phenomenon in which the shaman uses his specific ability to make contact with the supernatural world does however have a distinguishing feature which Chun (1999:18) defines as an attempt to “help us realise all the desires and necessities required by humans, such as fortune-omen-mishap-blessing etc. by the use of this transcendental power.”

In this regard Shamans perform three basic functions in Korea namely, that of divine healer, diviner/prophet and manipulator of events. Divination is considered a form of prophecy in which the shaman is able to predict various events in life such as a successful journey, business affairs, finding the appropriate spouse and choosing a grave site. According to Chae (2002:52) the shaman is able to do this by means of different forms of divination. Chae (2002:52) highlights the difference between Korean shamans (*mudang*) and shamans in Siberia. Korean shamans have lost the ability of becoming spirits of natural objects themselves (Chun 1999:25).

Exorcism is considered to be a form of shamanistic healing. Shamans cast out the spirits with helpers which are the *obang changgun* or the “god-generals of the five directions.” Each of these gods is believed to control one of the four directions and the centre of heaven (Shearer 1968:64). The *Kut* (dance with drum for exorcism and healing) highlights the role of the shaman in the process of exorcism and healing involving sacrifices to the water spirits, ceremonies to obtain blessings and to recall of the souls of the dead by means of songs, dance, drum beating, and cymbal clanging.

Therefore, the primary focus of Shamanism is an attempt to solve difficulties and problems in daily life and to evoke a blessing through resorting to the power of the dead. Its purpose is partly similar to that of ancestral sacrifice which strives to maintain a harmonious relationship with deceased ancestors in the hope of retaining their protection in the here and now.



Clearly then, Shamanism and ancestor worship both rely on the belief in the intervention of the dead in the lives of the living and the implicit relationship between life and death. It points to the mutual interdependence existing between the living and the dead members of the community. Therefore, the living and the dead are believed to be linked together in a way that makes the ancestral rites a vehicle for the living to intervene in the life of the dead in order to further their salvation or protection (Berentsen 1985:86).

#### **4.3.2.3 Buddhism**

Buddhism has had a significant influence on Korean culture and religion for more than a thousand years. Buddhist philosophy still influences Korean thought today especially since Buddhist teachings acknowledge the importance of the living and the dead. With regard to ancestor worship in Korea, the influence of Buddhism is less significant than the influence it has had on ancestor worship in Japan where ancestor worship has become syncretised with Buddhism into a form of Japanised Buddhism. Japanised Buddhism will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Buddhism has been part of the Korean civilisation since the time when Korea was divided into three kingdoms: the *Silla* kingdom (57 B.C-935 AD), the *Paekjae* kingdom (18 B.C. - 660 AD), and the *Koguryo* kingdom (37 B.C-668 AD). Chae (2002:56) states that Buddhism was introduced to *Koguryo* in 372 AD by Sundo, a priest from China. Twelve years later a famous priest, *Maranda*, brought Buddhism into the kingdom of *Paekjae* which passed it on to Japan in 552 AD. In 424 AD *Mukocha*, also a priest, shared Buddhism with the people of the *Silla* kingdom (Rhodes 1934:50).

Aum (2001:31) in his description of Korean Buddhism points out that Buddhism and Shamanism in its current forms share common traits because they have similar origins. This is possibly the reason why many Koreans are comfortable with both. This blend of Korean Buddhism and Shamanism is evident in Korean Buddhist documents such as *Daejang Sacred*. In these documents the syncretisation of Shamanist elements with Buddhism is presented in a rather systematised way. Ancestor worship is included.

It is important to note that in the Korean context Shamanism and Confucianism have had a greater influence on ancestor worship than Buddhism (Bae 2004:347). There are, however, two conspicuous elements in Buddhism which have been absorbed into ancestral sacrifice namely the concept of Nirvana and the concept of a cyclical life (Samsara).

Ryu (1965:40) describes nirvana as “a state of being far removed from all human sufferings.” It is also the state of complete annihilation, nothingness or final death. Samsara has come to an end.

The attainment of “Nirvana” is considered the ultimate salvation in Buddhism. Buddhists aim to follow the example of Siddharta Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, who reached “Nirvana”. However, in Korean and Japanese Buddhism, due to syncretisation with indigenous religion such as shamanism and ancestor worship, it is believed that

the dead spirit can be helped to reach Nirvana by means of sacrifices or rituals performed by the living (Chae 2002:57).

Nida (1954:172) describes the Buddhist cyclical understanding of life as “the constant succession of morning, noonday, evening and night - the endless repetition of spring, summer, fall and winter - the ever-present transition from birth through puberty and adulthood to old age and death – all this has given rise to the concept of the cycle of existence and the wheel of destiny and where there is no such thing as actual progress, for soon the cycle will move on around and all will be the same again.” This concept of the cyclical nature of life articulates well with ancestor worship. In principle, a dead spirit can be saved if he/she is not astray in the nine celestial bodies. In order to prevent the spirit from going astray and ensure that he/she will be reborn into the present world, ancestor worship has become entrenched and systematised in various rituals and festivals which Buddhism provides.

#### **4.3.2.4 Confucianism**

Confucianism has had a significant and pervasive influence on religion in Korea. Confucianism vies with Shamanism in terms of its long-range influence on Korean religious life and has had an overwhelming effect on the social and political aspects of Korean culture. Confucianism was already popular in the days of the three kingdoms in Korea. Kim (1984:67) describes Confucianism as optimistic humanism which has established the frame of Korean lifestyle, social structure and political philosophy. It was only later that Confucianism evolved into a religion rather than a philosophy, and eventually became more pervasive than in China.

Various scholars (Kim 1988; Grayson 1989; Bae 2004) consider Confucianism to be the basis of the ethos of the Korean people and a powerful means of upholding ancestor worship. In this regard Grayson (1989:215-6) maintains that Confucianism’s influence on the social and cognitive structures of Korean society has outlived the Confucian system of government. He also points out that although many people tend to think of Confucianism as a part of history, its influence on Korean thought and social life is still significant to this day. This is mainly because of the relevance of Confucian concepts such as filial piety, loyalty and family propriety which still dominate Koreans’ perspective on life to this day.

This view of the relevance and continuing influence of Confucianism in modern Korean society is supported by Kim (1988:80) who acknowledges that the convictions and ethos of Korean Christians to be essentially Confucian. Therefore, having taken cognisance of the essentially Confucianist nature of the Korean mindset, it is crucial to consider the dominant tenets of Confucianism, specifically filial piety and how it relates to ancestor worship.

*Filial piety* is one of the core tenets of Confucianism. Central to this notion is the idea of the solidarity of the family structure. Ryoo (1985:54) therefore argues that this Confucianist paradigm, in which the importance of family and filial piety is paramount, is



evident in *Sarye Pyunram*, which continues to influence the customs and conventions of decorum and family issues.

Kang (1988:74) supports this view and points out that Koreans who did not conform to the customs and philosophy rooted in Confucianism, faced ostracism and would never be accepted as legitimate members of society. It is my contention that the Yi government exploited this for political gain and continued to build many Confucian schools throughout the country and overtly promulgated the virtues of filial piety and the proper rites of ancestor worship in an attempt to solidify their own position of sovereignty and family solidarity.

This influence from the education system permeated individual clans and families who rigorously observed the rites of ancestor worship which consequently ensured that the Yi family remained in power from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The integrating influence of ancestor worship left an indelible print on Korean society as a whole. Even today, ancestor worship remains a sacred symbol in which Koreans find meaning and purpose for their lives and is closely intertwined with the Korean sense of identity. Over the centuries the observance of these rituals which are essentially a manifestation of the tenets of filial piety and loyalty served to strengthen family ties and solidified the fabric of Korean society.

It is important to note that ancestor worship always formed part of officially recognised religion – in this case Confucianism. As a result filial piety as taught by Confucianism became an established aspect of the moral and social structure of ancestor worship. At the core of both ancestor worship and Confucianism is the notion of filial piety.

#### **4.4 TWO FACTORS IN ANCESTOR WORSHIP**

The diverse views on the moral and social nature of ancestor worship among Korean Christians suggest that there is more than one approach. There are actually two levels of participation namely moral and social. Furthermore, the Confucianist and Shamanistic conceptions of ancestor worship are essentially different and need to be explored.

##### **4.4.1 Moral and social aspects of ancestor worship**

The moral aspect was an important factor in the preservation and development of ancestor worship in most East Asian countries. Ro (1988:12-13) argues that the Confucian tradition has been most influential in developing a moral foundation for ancestor worship in Korea. The inextricable interweaving of Confucian morality with ancestor worship is exemplified in the notion of “filial piety”.

The notion of filial piety has to do with the kinship system in Korea. Filial piety, as the crux of the Confucian moral system extends beyond serving one’s own parents whether they are alive or dead. Ancestor worship has become the most effective ritual expressing filial piety for dead relatives. Aum (2001:34) points out that filial duty according to Confucius extended also to the king, teacher, master, and elderly people.

The Confucianist philosophy maintains that all men are inherently good, irrespective of their status at birth. The belief is that all persons emanate from heaven and have been blessed with heaven's virtues and divine order when we are born into this world. The essential question here is not what constitutes "humanness" but rather what a person can do to fulfil his/her inherent nature and/ or potential. Chan (1963:36) states that Confucius believed that man can fulfil this divine potential by practising benevolence. Benevolence is practised by showing brotherly love and filial piety. In fact, Confucius considered filial piety to be the foundation of virtue and believed that all lessons stemmed from it.

Ch'oe (1988:36) notes that the fundamental spirit of filial piety can be summarised in two acts:

- 1) The act of rewarding the origin from which one has received life. It stands to reason then that one cannot but reward your parents as the origins of your life, body and spirit.
- 2) The act of repaying the affection and favours that your parents have given you. Choe (1988) continues to give three forms within which these two acts can be expressed:
  - Firstly, preserving one's own body.
  - Secondly, filial piety is shown in serving and respecting one's parents.
  - Thirdly, it expresses itself in upholding the teachings of one's parents and advancing in society.

These factors are crucial to understand the nature of Korean ancestor worship because filial piety does not end when one's parents die but the duty of rewarding and repaying them continues after their death. This usually takes shape in the funeral and regular memorial rites which involve food and drink gifts which are enjoyed by the family after the rite. The purpose of a memorial service is not to invoke blessings upon one self. The true importance and significance of the Confucian ancestral rituals is essentially that it constitutes a fulfilment of the prescribed filial duties by recognising the contributions of your ancestors and rewarding the source of your life, and returning the favours and blessings you received from your own parents.

Hence, Ryoo (1985:54) argues that the basic idea of a sacrificial ritual is firmly rooted in the notion of filial piety. In Confucianist thought, filial piety is considered the foundation of goodness and the uppermost virtue. Moreover, Mencius (a disciple of Confucius and famous Confucianist scholar in his own right) taught that reverence for parents is the most important value. Clearly then, filial piety should not be considered just one of many virtues advocated by Confucianism, but rather as the quintessential cornerstone of Confucian ethical values. Confucius placed strong emphasis upon filial piety to enhance the family relationship which is considered to be the basis of the so-called rule of virtue. He equated reverence for one's parents with reverence for the so-called universal law and maintained that parents should be revered as Cheonju (天主) or the Confucian notion of heaven) is to be revered, (Joo 1978:263). Man as a moral being ought to respect and venerate his ancestors and thereby return to the roots of his

existence. The idea of “returning to the origin” and the feeling of “gratitude” comprise the foundation of the Confucian notion of filial piety (Ro 1998:12).

According to the Confucianist philosophy, filial piety is unaffected by life and death essentially. Furthermore, personal moral development starts with the practise of filial piety and does not cease when one’s parents die. Joo (1978:21) points out that Mencius argued that offering rite for the dead is more important than taking care of the living because the dead are unable to do something for themselves to prolong their otherworldly life. As a result, they are dependent upon the living to ensure posterity (Joo 1978:21).

It stands to reason that ancestor worship is essentially a ritualised manifestation of filial piety. Of course one cannot divorce the moral dimension from the ritual dimension of filial piety. They are inextricably linked.

The Confucian idea of “*li*” (禮 propriety) is a good example of the inextricable nature of the relationship between morality and ritual. “*Li*” represents the synthesis of the inner moral awareness and the outward expression of it – not merely communication of one’s moral integrity but also being part of self-cultivation. *Li* is not only a form of expressing one’s moral quality, but more importantly, a means of enhancing it. In this respect, one can safely say that the Confucian notion of morality (and by implication, the notion of filial piety) starts and ends with *li*. This is evident in the following extract from the Analects which clearly shows the significance of propriety and how it articulates with the rituals of ancestor worship: “When parents are alive, serve them according to the rules of propriety. When they die, bury them according to rules of propriety and sacrifice to them according to the rules of propriety” (The Analects. 2:5, Wing-tsit Chan’s translation, Chan 1963:23).

The extract from The Analects, cited above also clearly indicates that this adherence to propriety in terms of filial piety is applicable in life, death and the hereafter. The notion of *Li* is a golden thread which is evident in all of these stages of life.

The question remains to what extent ancestor worship can be considered moral rather than religious? And further, are religious elements evident in ancestor worship in Korea today? In this regard, Aum (2001:32) acknowledges that although Confucianist thought is considered mainly a system of morality, it has an undeniably religious dimension. We will now take a closer look at ancestor worship in order to determine which aspects of it can be considered essentially religious in nature.

#### **4.4.2 Religious elements in ancestor worship**

It is my contention that it is impossible to negate the religious elements of ancestor worship in favour of the ethical elements. These two dimensions are inextricably intertwined. This view is supported by Kim (1988:21-22) who argues that aside from the general ethical duty to express gratitude and to adhere to the Mandate of Heaven, there are unquestionably religious elements intrinsic to the rites of ancestor worship.

For example, the concept of the immortality of the soul is fundamental to ancestor worship. Confucius never overtly taught the immortality of the soul, but Confucian tradi-

tion teaches that when a man dies his soul ascends to heaven and his form goes down to earth, and that the two are united in the ancestor worship ceremony (Choi 1979: 128). Clearly then, the ancestor worship ritual is essentially religious in nature since it has a significant religious doctrine at its foundation.

This is also supported by Yi Yulgok, a saintly Korean Confucian scholar (1536-1583), who stressed the necessity of ancestor worship. He believed that when a man dies, the immortality of his soul depends entirely on whether or not he receives sincere devotion. In essence then, descendants remember their ancestors and are devoted to them to ensure that they remain for posterity (Choi 1979:129).

Another undeniably religious element of the ancestor worship ceremony is the notion that ancestors are able to bestow heavenly blessings. Faithful practise of filial piety and devoted care to ancestor worship ceremonies would enable the ancestors to bless their descendants. Blessings do not come anonymously from Heaven. Thus, the ancestors assumed the role of deities. They became objects of worship.

Confucius and his contemporaries had a healthy respect for invisible entities like spirits and ghosts. At the time, his contemporaries worshipped ancestors because they believed that the souls of the ancestors which continue to exist after death continue to influence the lives of their descendants. It was believed that if they suffered misfortune it was because they had not revered their ancestors or neglected them. Therefore, ancestor worship became a very important custom. Confucianism, on the other hand, was more concerned with the living and aimed at teaching men how to attain the ultimate state of perfection – i.e. full of virtue. Confucianism did not overtly promote the notion of heaven after death but rather strove for trustfulness, whole-heartedness, and its perfection.

Aum (2001:32) points out that in Confucianist terms man is considered to be the most rational and respectable being between heaven and earth and therefore acts as a mediator between them. This is entrenched in the Confucian Document (*Yukgyoung*) which describes the Confucian belief in the principles of Yin and Yang (the dual cosmic forces) and the blueprint of the religious features of Confucianism which encompass respect of the heaven, worshipping ancestors and self-discipline.

Clearly then, ancestor worship has a social and religious dimension. What is the nature of the relationship between these dimensions? Janelli (1982:163) distinguishes between ancestor worship and the shamanistic treatment of the dead. They represent two ways of achieving different but not necessarily incompatible objectives. The main difference lies in the beliefs about ancestors.

In Shamanism ancestors are dependent upon their descendants. The latter are punished if they do not honour and serve the ancestors. The ancestors are therefore regarded as being threatening and vindictive. It is essentially their dependence on their closest relatives which causes them to afflict their descendants (Janelli 1982:154). Ancestor worship, on the other hand, focuses on the well-being of the society and idealises ancestors. The relationship between the ancestors and their closest surviving rela-

tives is essentially a symbiotic one of mutual dependency (Hicks 1976:19; Yoder 1974: 7-8).

Ro (1988:16) points out that ancestor worship lacked the cosmological dimension of Shamanism. He argues that this was probably a significant factor which contributed to the fusion of the Confucian tradition and Shamanism. Confucianists were not particularly interested in defining or exploring man's relationship to the universe (cosmology) or their origins (ontology) and the hereafter and therefore did not provide a paradigm for cosmological perspective. Shamanism filled this void and provided an adequate worldview or cosmological matrix for ancestor worship.

Confucius and his contemporaries were preoccupied with the here and the now. Although they acknowledged spiritual beings, they did not attempt to explore and speculate on the existence or nature of these beings. Choi (1974:429) supports this view and points out that Confucius believed that the first priority should be to take care of man before one can consider attempting to serve or understand beings which we do not know or understand. Confucianism's focus was therefore mainly on the morality of human nature rather than attempting to define or describe the cosmological or an ontological significance of human beings. As mentioned before, filial piety was the cornerstone of Confucian morality, but in no sense did it pertain to the cosmological or ontological aspects of human nature.

Shamanism, on the other hand, provided a useful way of relating life and death, as well as the spiritual and the physical realm. By acquiring a cosmological paradigm ancestor worship became more than moral or social customs. During the Yi dynasty it developed into a form of worship. As a result, ancestor worship was no longer a ritual which was exclusively practised by Confucianists, but became a popular and entrenched family ritual irrespective of religious affiliation.

Thus, ancestor worship did not continue in its original pure Confucianist form as a manifestation of filial piety and a means of attaining virtue. It became a blended with elements of Shamanism, Animism and Buddhism. This added to its religious nature. With these issues in mind, we will now take a look at ancestral rituals in Korea and how these factors are reflected in ancestral rituals in that context.

## **4.5 ANCESTRAL RITUAL**

Most non-Christian Koreans observe annual festivals and ritual services directed at the ancestors. These festivals and rituals take place within the family context or at home. The most popular ones are the *ch'arye*, only twice a year, on New Year's Day (*Sul*) and August 15 (*Chusuk*, of the lunar calendar).

### **4.5.1 Worshippers**

Ancestor worship in Korea has a long and detailed tradition of ritual and protocol. The worshipper and the ancestors are both important. According to tradition, the ritual heir (descendant who is to maintain the tradition) has to be a direct and legitimate descendant of the ancestor. In most cases this is the *chongia*, or eldest son.

Lee (1987) says that the legitimate successor would normally be the eldest son. He also forms the direct line of succession. Tradition dictates that even if the eldest son were to die while his own eldest son is young, the child becomes the new ritual heir and is therefore able to claim precedence over his more mature uncles. If the eldest son dies in his youth, his younger brother becomes the legally designated heir (Lee 1987: 57). Thus succession and inheritance are inextricably linked with ancestor worship in Korea.

Unfortunately, the constraints of modern life do not always make this tradition practicable. The tradition dictates that the eldest son becomes the ritual heir and after the death of his father, assumes the primary responsibility for performing the rituals for all his direct ancestors up to the fourth generation (Lee 1987:58).

Nowadays most Koreans practise ancestor worship twice a year. This is due to the influence of urbanisation since many people who rent accommodation are unable to celebrate ancestor worship and perform rituals regularly. A further factor which complicated matters is the fact that since most Koreans are employed in the cities, they are limited in the number of days' leave they can take to visit their parents in the countryside to celebrate ancestor worship. As a result, most Koreans are only able to get leave to visit their native places on national holidays such as lunar New Year and Harvest Moon (lunar August 15) when tea ceremonies are held (Lee 1989:175).

Lee (1989:173-174) describes the sacrificial rites which a family observes for their ancestors as *chesa*. He distinguishes between three main types, namely:

- *Charye*: These are tea rites which are held 4 times a year during the day on significant holidays like the lunar New Year (*Sul*) or the Autumn Harvest Festival on lunar August 15<sup>th</sup> (*Chusuk*).
- *Kije*: These are household rites which are held at home at midnight on the night before the death day of ancestors (*Ki-il*). These rites are intended to commemorate four generations of ancestors.
- *Sije*: These are seasonal rites which are held for ancestors who are five or more generations removed. They are the only rites which are performed once a year in the tenth lunar month at the tomb of each ancestor.

In Korea it is traditional for the eldest son to live with his parents for the rest of his life. Younger sons live with their parents for an indefinite period of time but after marriage form their own households. It is this tradition of succession and inheritance which perpetuated the tradition of ancestor worship and entrenched it in Korean culture. It is also a traditional requirement for the surviving heir to bear the same surname as the ancestors. Lee (1997:37 and 1973:37) notes that the Korean preoccupation with the transmission of ritual headship outweighs even similar considerations in Chinese and Japanese succession.

In spite of logistical difficulties and daily practical complications in modern Korean lifestyles ancestor worship has survived. Modern Koreans have adapted and have continued to celebrate household ancestor worship in spite of the conflict in their circumstances with the prescriptions of tradition. Many of these are young Koreans who have



inherited the responsibility to perform the rituals of ancestor worship. In many instances, when the parents have died and the eldest son celebrates ancestor worship in the parents' home, then the younger siblings are expected to travel there to attend the sacrifice. It has become accepted practice for younger sons to go to the home of the eldest son (if he no longer lives in his deceased parents' home) to celebrate ancestor worship for their parents and grandparents.

It is possible that one of the reasons for the continued adherence to ancestor worship by young urbanised Koreans is the lack of a family structure in the urban jungle. In traditional Korean society, clans were close-knit and lived in relatively close proximity to one another which meant that there was frequent contact and interaction between siblings, cousins and other members of the clan. The constraints of modern living and employment conditions, has dissolved the clan structure in the cities in the sense that families no longer live in close proximity to one another and in some cases are only able to get together over Christmas. Continuing with the ancestor worship rituals in urban environments is thus a means of retaining the family structure and provides opportunities for family members to get together and interact.

#### 4.5.2 Ancestors

The previous section outlined what the Korean tradition dictates in terms of the worshippers and now one needs to ask: who are the ancestors? Furthermore: what are the religious tenets underlying this belief?

In this regard, Lee (1987:65) explains that Koreans traditionally believe that living human beings have three souls called *hon*, and seven spirits, called *paek* which occupy the eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth. The commonly held belief is that at death, one soul departs for the afterlife, another remains in the mortal remains and the other is taken back to the familial home in a *honbaek* box which is a specially prepared case for this purpose. The soul which is believed to be housed in this box, is the one which is worshipped during *chesa* (sacrificial rites which a family observes for their ancestors).

In the case of dead souls whose families do not perform *chesa*, they are condemned to wander the world as hungry ghosts and therefore leave their descendants behind untended and unprotected. So-called bad spirits are the souls of persons who died an abnormal or untimely death. These souls are believed to have died with a wounded heart (*han*). In these cases Shamanistic or Buddhist requiems were to be performed.

Good spirits, in other words ancestors who died of natural causes in their homes and whose families honour and worship them according to tradition are believed to have a guardian-like role – to protect their descendants from calamity and disappointments and therefore exert a powerful influence on the lives of the living. However, this ancestral presence is believed to disappear after four generations. It is at this point where the descendants bury the ancestor's tablet at the grave site.

What does tradition state about children who die before their parents? According to the Confucian tradition unmarried children who die before their parents are considered unfilial and are therefore not entitled to receive *chesa*. However, if the death of an un-

married son effectively means the extinction of his father's line, tradition dictates that he may be married posthumously to a dead virgin. A living "son" will then be adopted to perform *chesa* for the couple and for the other ancestors of the house. Cases of posthumous marriage and adoption have been recorded in Kwangsan-gun, South Kyung-sang Province, and on Cheju Island (Lee 1987:66).

#### **4.5.3 The procedure of ancestral ritual**

Oak (2002:328) points out that there are two essential dimensions to ancestral ritual: the motive which is essentially Confucianist and the beliefs which are Shamanistic or religious. These two dimensions are evident in the procedures and symbolic meanings of the ancestral ritual itself.

Traditionally the ancestral ritual is conducted by the eldest son, the Master of Rites and the Keeper of the Tablets. The ritual procedure entails that he stands up and bows deeply to an ancestral tablet when it is removed from the shrine. This is similar to the bow of respect the ancestor would have received if he/she were alive. The tablet is more than a mere memorial. It is believed to be a symbol, even the residence of the ancestral soul. Therefore the bowing down before the tablet (and the ancestral soul) is not far removed from worshipping.

He then recreates the meeting of heaven and earth by tossing three cups of wine into a bowl of rice or sand. This signifies the ancestors' descent from heaven to the presence of his descendants at the offering table (Lee 1987:68).

Once this has happened, the Master of Rites invokes the soul by lighting incense and pouring a libation. The first cup of wine is dedicated after rotating it three times in the incense. This dedication of the first cup of wine is the primary right of the heir. Another family member will uncover the rice bowl and place a spoon and chopsticks on an empty bowl. At this point all the descendants bow twice touching the floor with their heads. A commemorative address is chanted which pays a respectful tribute to the memory of the deceased. The second cup of wine is dedicated by the second son or the Ritual Master's wife in a repeat of the Ritual Master's dedication. Another relative follows suit and dedicates the third cup of wine. The spoon is then placed in the rice bowl.

These dedications are an expression of the descendants' desire for the ancestor's presence. When the Master of Rites senses the presence of the ancestral soul, he offers liquor and food in a symbolic gesture of respect and sincerity. After this a ritual prayer is read which calls upon the ancestor's soul to enjoy these sacrifices as a tangible expression of the descendants' affection. This is significant and indicative of worship rather than mere reverence. The descendants pray directly to the ancestor and not to God in the presence of the ancestor. This constitutes a form of worship by according divine characteristics to the ancestor.

All the worshippers then leave the room to allow the soul to enjoy the sacrifices. This ritual leads the descendants to believe that the ancestral soul is present and attentive and therefore responsive.

After the soul “has enjoyed the sacrifices”, the descendants re-enter the room and serve tea before bowing deeply and bidding the soul farewell. Once this has happened, the Master of Rites, returns the tablet to the shrine and burns a tablet of paper.

After completion the ritual food and beverages are shared by the family members in a symbolic sharing of identity and harmony. The soul is believed to promote unity and harmony in the family. In theological terms, one can liken this to a holy communion between the dead and the living. The religious connotations are obvious and incontrovertible.

It is important to bear in mind that even though Confucian ancestral rites aim primarily at fulfilling one's moral and social filial duties by remembering the ancestors, rewarding the origin, and repaying favours given by ancestors, it is essentially still a religious ritual in which one cannot divorce the religious tenets from the social aspect of ancestor worship.

The ritual contact with the ancestral soul alludes to the stages of life. Janelli and Janelli (1975:153) compared it to the care children take of an elderly parent who is served three meals a day. During the mourning period he receives one meal a day. For four generations after his death he is served quarterly on an annual basis. After that he receives food annually at his grave. It is believed that death is one of numerous transitions in the life of the ancestor. The ancestor is believed to be present in the lives of the living and slowly fades over a period of time.

This perpetuation of the family structure and filial piety was the basis of the Confucianist ideal. Ancestor worship was equated with filial piety which was believed to be the foundation of all other virtues. Therefore, a lack of filial piety and neglecting one's ancestors was considered sacrilegious. Individuals who did not subscribe to this tradition and the notion of filial piety were ostracised from the remaining family and the society at large (Gale 1893:660). This is because not adhering to these traditions meant negating the family identity and sense of community. Ancestor worship in essence, can then be described as an attempt to preserve the prosperity of the living (Oak (2002: 329).

#### **4.6 EARLY KOREAN CHRISTIANITY AND ANCESTOR WORSHIP**

In this section we will explore how South Korean Christians attempted to deal with the issue of ancestor worship in their churches and how ancestor worship is regarded in terms of its theological constructs. In order to gain an understanding of these issues one needs to understand the complex relationship between ancestors, folk religion, and Korean Christianity in both its Catholic and Protestant forms. This will be discussed in order to provide a contextual view of how ancestor worship is practised in Christian communities in Korea.

The early Christian communities in Korea had disparate views on the acceptability of ancestor worship. The early Roman Catholic community initially rejected ancestor worship out of hand as pagan. Later it became accepted and was integrated into the Roman Catholic Church practices in Korea. Protestants on the other hand, have consis-

tently refused to accept ancestor worship on theological grounds. The next section provides a brief historical background of each and will explore both points of view in an attempt to arrive at an explanation for the difference.

#### 4.6.1 Roman Catholic Christianity

Roman Catholicism was not introduced by foreign missionaries into Korea. Kim, MH (1988:22) points out that Catholic Christianity was introduced by Korean scholars as a result of their contact with Christian literature which they obtained in Peking. One of the earliest known Jesuits in China, Matteo Ricci, lived in Peking in 1601 where he propagated Jesuit Christianity by introducing Western science and publishing Christian literature. Interestingly enough, in his *True Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven* (天主實義), which appeared in 1601, Ricci described Confucianism and its traditions as a preparation for Christianity. This was possibly the means of least resistance and therefore his mission policy can be considered to be accommodationist (Choi 1974:422).

The Korean emperor frequently sent envoys to Peking to pay homage to the Chinese Emperor. It was during these envoys that Koreans were introduced to Matteo Ricci and consequently Catholicism.

In 1631, Jung doo-Won (鄭斗源), a member of the royal envoy, brought some of Ricci's books back to Korea, including Ricci's *True Doctrine* (Kim 1988:22).

It was towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century that Catholicism became established in Korea. In 1777, a few respected scholars, such as Chong Yak Chon (丁若銓) and Kwon Chyol Sin (權哲身), took an interest in the new doctrines. They openly discussed and propagated them and began to apply the Christian principles outlined in the books. It was only in 1783, when Yi Sung Hun (李承薰) went to China, converted and baptised in Peking that he was given the name of Peter in the hope that he would become the cornerstone of the church in Korea. He, in turn, baptised Lee Byuk and Kwon Il-shin who were both well read in Western thought. After this, the Catholic Church grew in leaps and bounds and the central figures were mainly from among the Namin Scholars, especially young members like Lee Byuk, Lee Sung-hun, and Jung Yak-yong. Through their vigorous work, the number of converted souls increased dramatically. It is for this reason that 1784 is generally regarded as the founding date of the Roman Catholic Church in Korea (Choi 1974:426).

What makes the establishment of Catholicism in Korea unique compared to other parts of the world, is that it was established by Koreans pioneers who were respected intellectuals and esteemed members of the society. It is very likely that it is because it was introduced to the Korean populace by known and respected locals rather than foreigners, who are usually regarded with suspicion, that the church grew exponentially in Korea. These respected members of the society decided on a Sabbath day and kept it. Later Kwon Il was ordained as a bishop while Lee Sung-hun, Lee Sowon, Choi Chang-hyun and Yoo ilwan-kom were ordained as priests (Ryu 1979:120).

It was in this time that the issue of the acceptability of ancestor worship became a hotly debated issue. This was contrary to the teachings of Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit mission which accepted the Confucianist tradition as a preparation for Christianity. They adopted an accommodationist mission policy because they regarded ancestor worship as a civil rather than religious ceremony.

Both Franciscan and Dominican missions, however, regarded Confucian ancestor worship as religious and superstitious. Accordingly, the two missions sent a petition to Rome and convinced Pope Benedict XIV, who made it clear in 1742 that the Confucian ceremony of ancestor worship was not permissible in the Catholic Church. The Chinese Church followed the new instruction as well and as a result met with great difficulties and even persecution in 1784 (Choi 1974:428). Catholics in Korea were also told to stop practising ancestor worship (Ryoo 1985:97).

This stance had disastrous effects. Korean Catholics were faced with terrible opposition, ostracism and eventually, Thomas Kim Pum Wu (金範寓) became the first to be martyred for burning his ancestral tablets. Zealous Christian converts destroyed their ancestral tablets and set them on fire. This led to systematic and organised persecution and many Christians were martyred as a result (Paik 1970: 32).

#### **4.6.1.1 *Conflicting ideologies and the first Christian martyrs in Korea***

This was to be expected when one looks at the long history of ancestor worship in Korea. In very ancient times and in primitive Shamanism, the shaman would make sacrifices to console the souls of the dead. In the *Shilla* and *Koryo* eras Buddhist ceremonies in honour of ancestors were performed. From the time of the *Chosun* (Yi) Dynasty down to the time of the Sadae Dynasty, persons of both noble and humble origins followed the regulations set out by Chu-Tzu and kept ancestral tablets and sacrifices on behalf of their ancestors.

Thus for some 300 years, any behaviour that ran counter to the teaching of Chu-Tzu and Confucianist ethics was considered treasonous and heretic. Persons who made themselves guilty of this were subjected to severe punishment and ostracism. So it stands to reason that when the Roman Catholic Church in Korea prohibited ancestor worship and in effect then rejected the teachings of Chu-Tzu, there would be a severe backlash (Ryu 1975:98).

In a knee-jerk reaction to the persecution one Catholic Christian in Korea wrote to the Bishop of Peking pleading for the assistance of Christian nations in Europe. When this letter was discovered it led to intensified persecutions and as a result Catholic Christianity became regarded as a perverse religion opposing filial piety and patriotic loyalty. The desperate plea in this letter suggested that the church had revolutionary political intentions. Thus, the Korean Catholic Church suffered persecution at the hands of the government in the years 1815, 1819, 1827, and 1839, and finally again in 1866 (Kim 1988:25). Many years later the Catholic Church reviewed its stance and changed its views on ancestor worship.

#### **4.6.1.2 Roman Catholic Church's assumes a different approach**

It was Pope Pius XII who declared that the Chinese custom of ancestor worship should be considered a civil rite as a means of expressing filial affection towards their ancestors. He did this in a "spirit of tolerance" which he believed was justified since traditional customs had changed significantly in modern times. As a result, in 1940 the Korean Catholic Church adopted a rather tolerant attitude toward traditional ancestor worship and declared bowing to a corpse, a tomb, or a picture of the deceased; burning incense in front of a corpse or at the ancestral tomb; and preparing and offering foods in memory of the deceased as permissible and therefore acceptable (Kang 1975:3).

This tolerant stance was endorsed when the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) stated that the Church had no desire to impose a rigid uniformity on matters which did not involve the faith or the good of the whole community. The council wanted to convey the idea that the Church respects and fosters the uniqueness of communities and their spiritual gifts as long as they are not overtly superstitious or erroneous. In such cases the Church would include such differences in the liturgy as long as it did not conflict with its true and authentic spirit (Abbott 1966:151).

One of the reasons for this more tolerant attitude towards ancestor worship is based on the Catholic tenet of purgatory where the dead who did not make it into heaven immediately wait till their sins are purged. The living believers are taught to pray for the dead in purgatory (Bullough 1963:141). Living members of the Church could previously buy indulgences to facilitate the purging of the dead's sins. The Church has even set a day, the 2nd of November, as a time of memorial and visiting ancestral graves.

#### **4.6.2 Protestant Christianity**

The decision of the Roman Catholic Church in Korea represents the more expedient route than the stance taken by the Protestant Church in Korea. The Protestants have consistently rejected ancestor worship as unbiblical and as a pagan tradition with strong religious elements.

The following section will be a brief exposition of the history of the Protestant Church in Korea with an explanation on why they have chosen to reject ancestor worship and how they have attempted to bridge the gap and meet the people's needs without compromising their faith.

Some scholars (Oak 2002:337; Ryoo 1985:102) attribute the religious persecution Protestants suffered to the fact that early missionaries misunderstood the nature of ancestor worship. They believe that it was this misconception of the essential nature of ancestor worship which prompted them to reject it out of hand as a pagan ritual.

Interestingly enough, Protestant Christianity similar to Catholicism was not introduced to Korea by foreign missionaries. In the case of Protestantism, it was introduced by Korean merchants who were exposed to Protestant Christianity in their travels to Manchuria. During 1878 the So brothers, Sang Yun and San U (also known as Kyong Jo) travelled to Manchuria to peddle merchandise and came to contact with John Ross and John MacIntyre, the well-known Scottish Presbyterian missionaries. As a result,



they were converted and the elder brother San Yun was baptised by John Ross in 1879. Together with John Ross, Sang Yun travelled to Mukden to assist with Bible translation and printing. Sang Yun later returned to Korea as a colporteur and smuggled the translated portion of the New Testament to his home village in Uiju and settled in Sorae in Hwanghae Province in 1883 a hundred years ago. So Sang Yun spread the Gospel and converted some of his neighbours and scattered the seed of the Gospel in the northwest of Korea. When American missionaries entered the country in 1884 and in 1885 there were already a few Protestant Christians (Paik 1970:51-54).

During the early years of the Korean Protestant Church, the dilemma of ancestor worship arose as it had with the Catholic Church years before. It was a troublesome time and the Church had to make a decision on whether or not ancestor worship would be accepted in the Church. The missionaries rejected the notion of ancestor worship as being contrary to Christian teachings and declared it a pagan ritual (Paik 1970:157).

In an attempt to make a decision on this matter, the early missionaries compiled a questionnaire to gauge the opinions of the Christian congregation. During this democratic procedure the Christians were required to write down their personal views on the custom. The unanimous opinion was that ancestor worship was contrary to the teachings expounded in the New Testament and that offering sacrifice was unscriptural and unacceptable (Paik 1970:220).

This rejection of ancestor worship became entrenched over time and it became a prerequisite when entering the Protestant Church in Korea. On account of this, those who became Protestants could not offer sacrifices to ancestors. The Korean Protestant Church required catechumens to take an oath against ancestral practices in order to be accepted for baptism. The first of these precepts (used during the period of 1891-97) read as follows: "Since the most High God hates the glorifying and worshipping of spirits, follow not the custom of the honouring of ancestral spirits, but worship and obey God alone." (Paik 1970:225)

Oak (2002:330) regards this consistent rejection of ancestor worship as a fairly intolerant policy. This policy was the same as the one followed by Chinese Protestant missions which was adopted at the General Missionary Conferences in Shanghai in 1877 and 1890 respectively. During these conferences they defined ancestor worship as idolatrous sacrifice and consequently required all candidates for baptism to reject ancestor worship (Appenzeller 1892:230-231).

My contention is that the missionaries' policy on ancestor worship was not so much intolerant as it was righteous and consistent with Christian principles. It was this unfailing belief in the Gospel and the application of Christian principles which caused the early missionaries to suffer severe persecution at the hands of the government. This outright rejection of ancestor worship was published in a tract by John Ross in 1879, entitled *Yesu syonggyo mundap*. John Ross rejected ancestor worship on the grounds of monotheism and idolatry. He points out that although we should revere the life and death of righteous individuals it would be unacceptable to worship them or pray to them for guidance. That is reserved for God alone.

Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries also published tracts which condemned ancestor worship as a form of idolatry. At the time, Nevius' *Errors of Ancestor Worship* was a prescribed text on this issue at theological training classes. Nevius rejected the practice of ancestor worship, Nevius acknowledges that although filial piety to the parents and ancestors are perfectly acceptable, it should be expanded to God and perfected in the worship of God. Instead of using ancestor worship to display filial piety, Nevius made alternative suggestions to express this. He suggested practical ways of doing this, e.g. being dutiful to living parents and relatives and performing proper funeral services. Other Chinese tracts repeated these arguments.

This is significant because Nevius acknowledges the need for expressing filial piety but attempts to find an alternative which would not conflict with Christian teachings. Nevius explained that as all traditions and customs are not all good, one needs to extract the good and adapt the distorted elements to align them with a more acceptable practice (Oak 2002:331).

The Protestant missions rejected ancestor worship for five main reasons. The first was that they felt that it constituted a religious sacrifice to the spirit of the dead ancestor and therefore was in conflict with the first and second Commandments. They rejected ancestor worship as a form of polytheism and idolatry.

Secondly, although ancestor worship supported the tenet of the immortality of the soul, missionaries rejected the notion that the soul could reside in a tablet in a shrine, eat sacrificial food, and bless his/her descendants and an unscriptural belief. The traditional belief that the soul is present for four generations and gradually fades away is contrary to the Christian teaching that the soul is invisible and spiritual and never vanishes for ten thousand years. Christianity teaches that there are only two destinations for the soul, namely heaven or hell.(Oak 2002:331)

The last two reasons are mainly based on anti-Roman Catholic sentiments. Evangelical missionaries considered the Korean view of the interdependence between the living and the dead as reminiscent of the Roman Catholic idea of saints and the theory of purgatory.

The Protestant missionaries were not too concerned about preserving the clan structure of traditional communities based on Confucianist traditions but were rather concerned about establishing a community of believers in Christ. They rejected a number of Catholic notions. They rejected Catholic Mass as unscriptural, disagreed with the church's theory of transubstantiation and regarded it as superstitious folly. As a result, when they saw similarities between Confucian ancestor worship and the Roman Catholic mass, they could not permit the former (Oak 2002:332)

The last reason was the belief that ancestor worship was the primary source of unacceptable customs such as early marriage in an attempt to ensure a male heir to continue the line, taking concubines, degrading women, poverty due to the costly nature of the funeral rites and mourning ceremonies and national stagnation (Oak 2002:333).

Aside from rejecting ancestral sacrifices, the early missionaries also prohibited Christian members of the congregation to touch or eat food offered during sacrificial

rites. This was because of the warnings in I Corinthians 10:21, Acts 15:29, and Revelation 2:14, 20 which state that eating sacrificial food is as bad as worshipping the idol (Oak 2002:333).

This stance opened the Protestant Church to a lot of public criticism. This escalated after an incident which was reported in the *Dongah Daily* on September 1, 1920. The article recounted how a Christian man, Mr Kwon Song-Hwa refused to allow his wife to perform the ritual expressions of filial piety for his late mother. His wife was a very pious woman and when she was prevented from practising filial piety, she committed suicide. The floodgates of criticism were opened and as a result the Christian dilemma of ancestral sacrifice escalated into a social problem and subjected Korean Christians to severe criticism.

The early missionaries considered any bow from the waist as displaying a worshipping attitude and therefore bowing to an ancestor's picture or tablet constituted a form of idol worship. Since then believers have been forbidden to perform ancestral sacrifices. Instead memorial services commemorating the day of death of departed members were organised annually (Ryoo 1985:104).

Although funeral ceremonies and memorial services did not seem to conflict with Christian theology, believers were left feeling guilty because they were not expressing their loyalty or affection for their deceased ancestors. In addition to leaving feelings of inadequacy, it did not solve the problem these believers faced when they were confronted by non-believers and family members who did not agree with their Christian views. Christian converts' rejection of ancestor worship provoked severe reproach and persecution from family members and friends alike. This caused considerable family discord, misunderstanding, friction, and alienation. However, most believers maintained their faith and refused to revert to the old customs.

Besides ridicule, insults, physical beatings, and financial damage, a convert suffered ostracism from the clan and society at large. His name was erased from the clan's genealogy, which was an eternal anathema for his apostasy (Oak 2002:338).

#### **4.7 MEMORIAL SERVICE, *CHUDOHOE***

Ryoo (1985:103) believes that it is essentially harmless for the family to gather and share food, hang up a picture of their deceased parents without abusing this practice.

In an attempt to address the social need for displaying affection, loyalty and gratitude to ancestors, the Protestant church instituted the memorial service or *Chudohoe*. This is a Protestant alternative to ancestral rites and should be considered to be commemorative rather than venerative in nature.

According to Oak (2002:347-348) Christian memorial services were adapted rituals corresponding to traditional ancestor worship rituals. *Chudohoe* retained the cultural and ethical heritage of ancestor worship but eliminated the religious dimension and changed its idolatrous character. These culturally assimilated memorial services soon became a model for other Christians, and gradually a more standardised liturgy developed. For instance, in May, 1903, when Son U-jong of Chemulpo observed the first

anniversary of his mother's death, he invited dozens of Christian brothers and sisters to a night service. They sang hymns, prayed, read the Scriptures, and reflected on her faith and deeds. After the service they shared food that she had loved. About this diluted form of the ancestral rite, a member of the church wrote: "This would be a better filial piety to the parents than preparing the ancestral table and weeping the whole night with a hoarse voice" (Oak 2002:348). From Oak's description, it is obvious that the memorial service is commemorative rather than worshipful. No prayers are said to the departed soul and no-one prostrates him- or herself in an expression of worshipful humility.

The nature of the memorial service is encoded in the term itself. As the term suggests, it is intended as an opportunity to cherish the memory of a dead ancestor and to reflect on the affection he/she had for his/her descendants while he was alive. It is not sacrificial in nature (Park 1984:182).

Clearly then, the Christian memorial service offers a viable alternative to ancestor worship. It does however need to be carefully structured to ensure that it remains essentially Christian and not a watered-down version of ancestor worship. Each element must be scrutinised to determine whether or not it is an acceptable practice.

#### (1) Preparation

The participant prepares a photograph of the deceased or if there is no photograph available, the name of the deceased may be written on a piece of paper. The photograph or sheet with the name of the deceased is placed in a high place which allows everyone in the room to see it. Ryoo (1985:103) finds it acceptable to light candles or decorate it with flowers. A family member may draft a short biography of the deceased or recount an anecdotal story about the deceased. The family of the deceased and those who attend the memorial service must wear simple clothes. This is a radical departure from the ostentation of the ancestral sacrifice.

Although Ryoo's suggestion is insightful and provides an opportunity to preach the Gospel to non-believers, I have some reservations about the appropriateness of lighting candles or decorating with flowers since it can be construed as a religious element which harkens back to invoking the ancestor's spirit.

#### (2) Time and Place

The family member's home, a cemetery or a churchyard is an appropriate venue and the time may be selected which would be convenient for all those who would like to attend.

#### (3) Arrangement of the Seats

The seating arrangement is usually done according to the degree of kinship. In other words, those who were closely related to the deceased will be placed towards the front together with any persons who perform parts of the programme such as the prayer.

#### (4) Procedure of a Service

The following programme outline is the suggested structure of a Christian memorial service.

- a. Opening Address: We will now offer a service to cherish the memory of the late Mr (or Mrs).
- b. Confession of Faith.
- c. Chanting of Hymns: Some proper hymns should be chosen.
- d. Prayer: the presiding person.
- c. Reading of Scriptures: the presiding person.
- e. Sermon: the preacher.
- f. Prayer: the preacher or someone else.
- g. Reading of a Memorial Writing: The person who presides at the service reports to the congregation on the career and the last injunction of the deceased. An order of silent tribute can follow.
- h. Chanting of Hymns: If the deceased was a Christian, all the participants sing a favourite hymn of the deceased. If otherwise, they can sing any other appropriate hymn.
- i. Benediction: the pastor.

If there is no pastor, the service is finished with the Lord's Prayer. All the participants share the food which has been prepared by the family and partake of fraternal communion in the name of God.

Kim (2004:150) points out that numerous Korean Christians have been conducting memorial services which are essentially a blend of Confucian ritual and Christian customs. For example, they look to the picture of the deceased, make a bow, burn candles and put them in front of the grave. The main reason for this is that the Confucian ritual has not yet been completely transformed into a Christian ritual.

There are still elements in the Christian memorial service which are too reminiscent of the Confucianist rituals. For example, Kim (2004) points out that the lighting of candles is similar to the incense used to invoke the spirit of the soul, displaying the picture of the deceased is similar to the tablet which is displayed in Confucian rituals, and bowing to the deceased can be construed as a worshipful gesture. It is my contention that although the Christian memorial service is a useful alternative to the ancestor worship rituals, it still has traces of Confucianism and elements of idolatry which ought to be removed. We have to transform the Confucian ritual into a Christian ritual. The memorial service is an important instrument enabling the Christian Church to meet people's need to express filial piety to their deceased parents (Oak 2002:348).

#### **4.8 CONCLUSION**

From the foregoing discussion it is clear that ancestor worship is not a phenomenon which is unique to Korea. It has however developed over a long period of time and blended with various indigenous religions like Shamanism and Confucianism to become an entrenched aspect of Korean culture. It is also clear that ancestor worship is a multi-faceted phenomenon, with a social and religious dimension.

The introduction of Christianity, first in terms of Roman Catholicism and later the Protestant Church in Korea, kindled a hotbed of discussion on the dilemma of ancestor worship. The initial rejection of ancestor worship on the grounds of idolatry sparked a vicious persecution campaign and many Christians were martyred for refusing to compromise and revert to ancestor worship. The Catholic Church later reversed its decision on ancestor worship and chose a more tolerant stance. The reason for this was that it appeared to be similar to the teaching of purgatory where Catholics are encouraged to pray for their deceased loved ones and the Catholic notion of saints.

The Protestant Church on the other hand, has remained steadfast and consistent in its rejection of ancestor worship as a form of idolatry and therefore an unscriptural practise. It is mainly because of this faithful devotion to the Gospel's teachings, that the Protestant Church has retained purity in its doctrines and its devotion to the Scriptures.